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ABSTRACT

Reading problems related to use of primary source materials in the upper elementary grades are investigated. A major focus was the appropriateness of original versus rewritten versions of primary source materials with respect to readability. The sample consisted of 209 fifth and sixth grade students and seven elementary school classroom teachers in Iowa public schools. The study was designed to include a pretest to measure the students' ability to comprehend original and rewritten (i.e. edited and/or clarified) primary source reading selections on Iowa history, a series of Iowa history lessons involving primary source materials, and a posttest to again measure the students' ability to comprehend primary source reading selections. All students were exposed to some original and some rewritten primary source material on either the pre- or posttests and all students were exposed only to original primary source material during the history lessons. Findings from analysis of pretest scores indicated that students who were exposed only to original versions of primary source materials scored significantly lower than students using rewritten versions of the same primary sources. Findings from analysis of posttest scores indicated that there were no significant differences on students' abilities to read original and rewritten primary source materials. The conclusion is that students became more able to comprehend original primary sources when they were given opportunities to work with these materials. One implication is that classroom teachers should generally use the original versions of primary source materials because, in so doing, they will provide students with the flavor of another time period which may not be accurately communicated by the rewritten version. (DB)

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READABILITY OF REWRITTEN AND ORIGINAL PRIMARY SOURCE MATERIALS IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

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Introduction

Reading has traditionally been an integral part of social studies instruction. Special problems have accompanied the reading of social studies materials however because of the broad topics studied and the wide variety of materials necessary for such topics. In addition to textbook selections, many social studies teachers have required the reading of newspapers, reference materials, maps, globes, secondary historical accounts, and sometimes primary source materials. All of these materials present their own special reading problems for students. Problems associated with reading primary source materials are accentuated because the reader must adjust for the historical setting, the viewpoint of the author, frequent grammatical inaccuracies and antiquated vocabulary and usage.

The use of primary source materials in teaching social studies is not a new idea. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century there was great interest in using primary source materials in America's classrooms. These materials, generally reserved for the secondary program, did influence the teaching of history for a time.

Recently there has been a revival of interest in the use of primary source materials in teaching history. Very little research has been conducted however to assess the usefulness of primary sources in teaching history and the particular reading problems associated with their use. A study was conducted to address these questions.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the reading problems related to the use of primary source materials in the upper elementary grades and the appropriateness of original and rewritten versions of primary source

materials with respect to readability.

Design of the Study

Two hundred nine fifth- and sixth-grade students and seven elementary teachers participated in the study. A pretest was given to measure the students' ability to comprehend primary source reading selections, a series of Iowa history lessons was taught using primary source materials, and a posttest was given to again measure the students' ability to comprehend primary source reading selections. Because the study was conducted in Iowa and Iowa history was taught in most elementary fifth- or sixth-grade classrooms, primary source materials related to Iowa's social history were selected for the tests and lessons. The content included pioneer period (1830-70) letters, diaries, and documents written in Iowa.

There were four forms of the reading test. Two of the forms contained original transcriptions of primary source materials. These forms were coded OA for original form A and OB for original form B.

Two alternate forms were developed in which the reading passages were rewritten to make the reading less difficult. These forms were coded RA for rewritten form A and RB for rewritten form B.

The following rules were applied when rewriting primary source passages for test forms RA and RB.

1. Individual words may be replaced by an alternate word.
2. Individual words may be replaced by a phrase.
3. Phrases may be reworded or reorganized for smoother reading.
4. Longer sentences may be divided into two or more sentences.
5. Care should be taken that the wording be changed as little as possible.
6. Punctuation and spelling erros will be corrected to conform to standard, present-day style.

The following example illustrates the application of the rules for rewriting primary sources:

(Original Version)

Letters of John and Sarah Kenyon

(Sarah Kenyon)

Aug 1st, 1859

. . . Well our wheat is pretty good this year so we shant have to buy flour I Hope. oats good barley good taters one and two in a hill sorghum good garden sass good all but the beans . . . . when I have a new dress I will send you a piece. I have not decided which to get a red one or a yaller one. I think as I cant afford but one I shall get the two colors combined. haven't bought a yard of calico or any other dress material since we came to Iowa. I have made over patched and repatched untill every thing is used up . . .

(Rewritten Version)

Letters of John and Sarah Kenyon

(Sarah Kenyon)

Aug 1st, 1859

Well our wheat is pretty good this year so we won't have to buy flour I hope. Our oats and barley are good. We have one or two potatoes to each hill. Our sorghum is good. Our garden vegetables are good except the beans.

When I get a new dress I will send you a piece. I have not decided whether to get a red one or a yellow one. I think as I can only afford one, I will get the two colors combined. I have not bought a yard of calico or any other dress material since we came to Iowa. I have made over, patched and repatched until everything is used up.

Following the preparation of text passages, the Fry readability formula was applied to each passage. The Fry test was used to give a relative indicator of reading difficulty for the rewritten and original passages. Because there was no test which would quantitatively summarize the effect on readability of antiquated or inaccurate grammar common within the original versions, it was assumed that the Fry scores for the original versions would only modestly reflect the real level of readability for those passages. Table I summarized the scores for each passage.

Table I
Fry Readability Scores
for Comprehension Test Passages

Form A	Original (Grade level score)	Rewritten (Grade level score)
1	9	7
2	9	7
3	7	5
Form B		
1	9	7
2	10	9
3	6	5
4	6	5

As Table I indicates, the original versions scored from one to two grades higher on each passage.

Following the preparation of test passages, 28 unique test items were written. Fourteen were written for Form A tests and 14 were written for Form B tests. The questions were designed to test literal

and inferential comprehension. In addition, certain questions were asked which would require students to mentally supply correct spelling or punctuation when reading passages in their original form.

Procedure

The subjects were pretested over their comprehension of primary source materials by randomly being assigned to one of the four test forms (OA, OB, RA, RB). Following the pretesting, each student was involved in approximately four weeks of instruction using the original transcriptions of primary sources as learning materials. The researcher provided each classroom with the materials and lesson plans.

After the four weeks of instruction with original source materials, the 209 subjects were posttested over their comprehension of primary source materials. Each subject was assigned a posttest according to the following prescribed procedure.

Pretest Assignment	Posttest Assignment
OA	Either OB or RB
OB	Either OA or RA
RA	Either OB or RB
RB	Either OA or RA

These procedures assured that no student would see the same test item twice. For example, pretested over form OA were randomly assigned to either OB or RB on the posttest.

Results

When pretesting students on their ability to read rewritten and original primary source materials, it was found that scores on tests using original versions of primary source materials were significantly lower than scores on tests using rewritten versions of the same primary sources. (See

Table II.)

Table II
Pretest Means for Combined Reading Test
Form R (RA, RB) and Form O (OA, OB)

Form	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	T-Value	Significant
O (OA,OB)	105	7.82	2.69		
				-3.98	$p \leq .02$
R (RA,RB)	104	9.21	2.31		

When posttesting students on their ability to read original and rewritten primary source materials, no significant differences were detected. Pre- and posttest scores on tests over rewritten material were nearly equal, while posttest scores on tests over original primary source materials were considerably higher than pretest scores, resulting in the nonsignificant posttest differences. That is, on the posttests following instruction using primary source materials, student scores on the tests with rewritten materials were not significantly different from the student scores on the tests with original materials. (See Table III.)

Table III
Posttest means for Combined Reading Test
Form R (RA,RB) and Form O (OA,OB)

Form	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	T-Value	Significant
O (OA,OB)	106	8.42	2.69		
				-2.19	NS
R (RA,RB)	103	9.17	2.63		

Conclusions

The results of this study seem to indicate that students will grow in their ability to comprehend primary sources when given opportunities to work with these materials. These results are particularly significant for two reasons.

First, using the original versions of primary source materials provides students with the flavor of another time period which may not be accurately communicated by the rewritten version. It is likely that much inferential learning is lost when original sources appear in glossy print with polished grammar and punctuation. Pioneer letters did not take on the refined character of social studies texts.

Second, the process of rewriting primary sources is very laborious and it is doubtful that most teachers would take the time and effort to accurately edit these materials.

Primary source materials can be valuable teaching aids, lending much flavor and interest to the study of history. Because students' ability to read these materials will be facilitated by experience, teachers should be encouraged to use original primary source materials as instructional materials whenever appropriate.